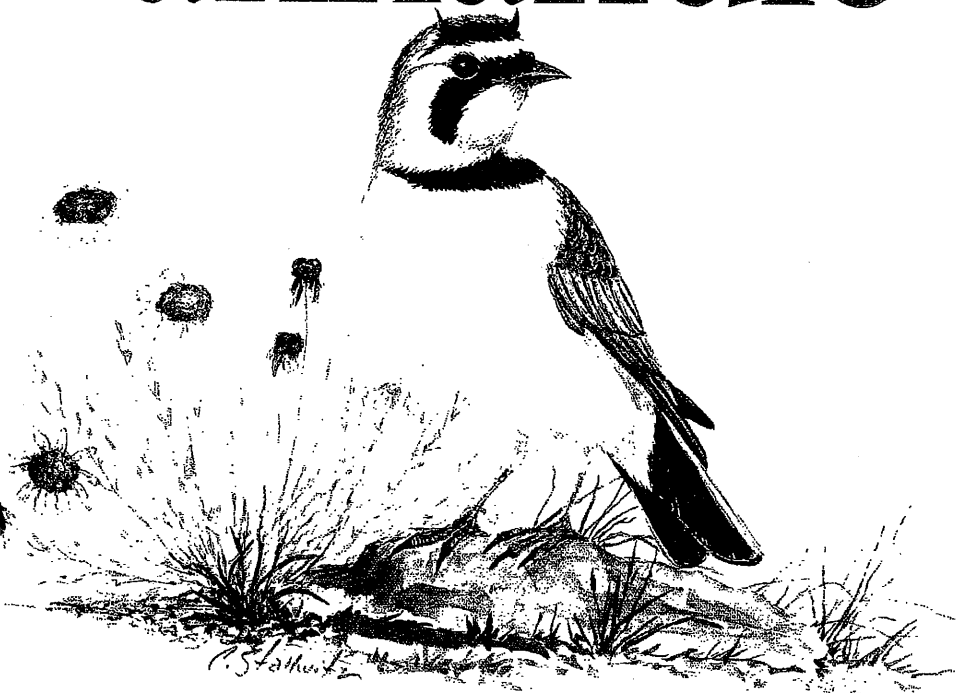


THEIR STATUS, DISTRIBUTION, AND HISTORY

Birds *of the* Texas Panhandle



Kenneth D. Seyffert

ILLUSTRATIONS BY CAROLYN STALLWITZ

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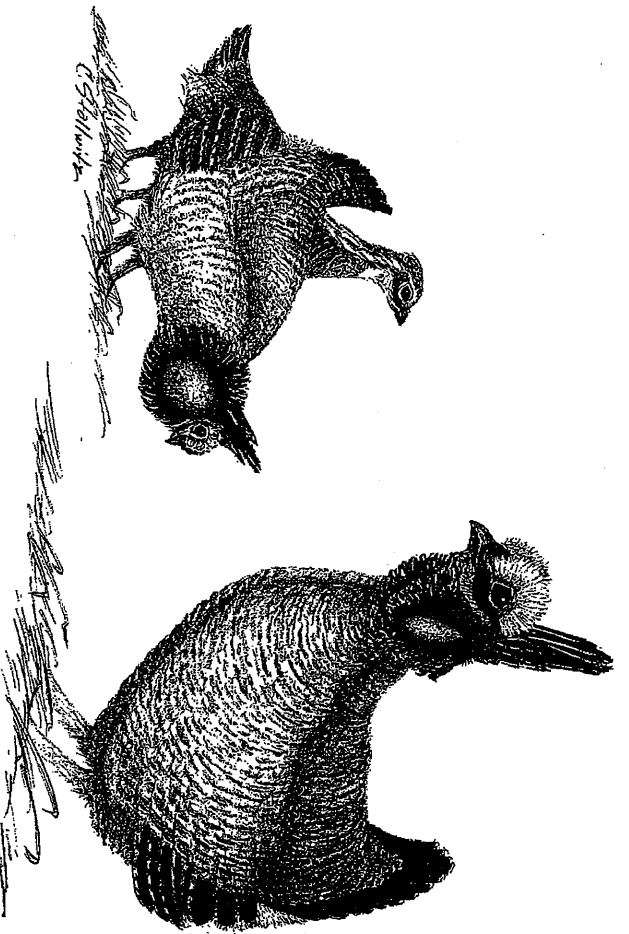
write the history of

bird life in the

Texas Panhandle

in the twenty-first

century



Lesser Prairie-Chicken

(LMAWM), Moore (MCHM), Lipscomb (23 February 1971, WTAMV), Randall (18 November 1973, WTAMV), and Swisher (14 December 1977, TCWC) counties.

Lesser Prairie-Chicken *Tympanuchus pallidicinctus* (Ridgway)

STATUS: Rare to fairly common local resident in the eastern third of the Panhandle.

OCCURRENCE: During the latter half of the twentieth century the Lesser Prairie-Chicken was recorded in 14 counties of the Texas Panhandle: Armstrong, Carson, Collingsworth, Deaf Smith, Donley, Gray, Hemphill, Lipscomb, Moore, Ochiltree, Parmer, Potter, Roberts, and Wheeler. Historically its range extended over most of the grasslands of the High Plains and Rolling Plains, but the species today is confined primarily to the eastern counties of Lipscomb, Hemphill, Gray, Wheeler, Donley, and Collingsworth (Litton et al., 1994), with almost all on privately owned land.

There are conflicting accounts of the distribution of the Lesser Prairie-Chicken in the Texas Panhandle prior to the implementation of widespread agricultural and range management practices that resulted in the modification and destruction of habitat. Abert (1846) traversed the Panhandle north of the

Canadian River in 1845. . . . ned seeing many flocks of quails and turkeys; however, he failed to n . . . prairie chicken. McCauley (1877) partially lifts the veil on its status in the late nineteenth century in his account of his journey through the area in May and June of 1876:

This magnificent game bird was first observed in traveling along the road south from Ft. Dodge, between the Cimarron and north fork of the Canadian. It was abundant in covers of from twenty to thirty; south of that less frequently seen. Beyond the Sweetwater, they were not found, nor were they seen in any part of the lower sections visited, until, on our return, we reached the rolling land north of McClellan Creek. This, the only one of the Grouse family proper we met with, avoids the Staked Plain, and ventures near it only where all the conditions of its prairie-life may be fulfilled.

Strecker (1910) also reported a restricted range, calling the species a "rare summer resident, more abundant in winter, but very locally distributed"; he later described it as "resident along the foot of the plains in the Panhandle county, south of the Canadian" (Strecker, 1912). He and his party had observed chickens in the Goodnight area of Armstrong County in May and June of 1910 (Strecker, 1910). Bent (1932), relying on information supplied by Walter Colvin in 1914, placed the Lesser Prairie-Chicken's breeding range no "farther south into Texas than two degrees by air line," and gave its winter range as "confined chiefly to central Texas." He stated further: "No information is available relative to the movements of this species between breeding and wintering areas." Colvin said it was "casual in winter at Lipscomb in the Panhandle area." Aldrich (1963) showed its original distribution as not only covering the entire Texas Panhandle but also extending southward through the southern plains as far as south of Midland. He did not make a distinction between breeding and wintering ranges; however, the AOV (1957) said that the southern plains were occupied only by wintering prairie chickens.

A more recent review of the Lesser Prairie-Chicken's status in Texas is that of Sands (1968), who relied chiefly on a study conducted by Jackson and DeArment (1963):

Originally the Lesser Prairie Chicken ranged throughout the Panhandle of Texas. Jackson and DeArment state that "the exact limits of the original range . . . cannot be clearly defined. . . . It may have been only a winter migrant in the southernmost part of its range in Texas." These authors place the current populations . . . in small, localized areas of northwest Texas, with the bulk of the population occurring in Wheeler, Hemphill and Lipscomb

Countries. "A few are found along the Texas-New Mexico line from Andrews to Lamb County." The current population in the Texas Panhandle is estimated at 3,000 birds.

The future of the Lesser Prairie Chicken in Texas is "not very promising." These authors sound a warning in the following manner. "In the spring months of 1957, the 6,500 acre Site II study area in Wheeler County was subjected to an aerial application of the hormone-type chemical 2,4,5-T. The objective was to control or eliminate brush and weeds. Although only a 25 percent kill was accomplished, acorn production was prevented for 2 years. The loss of a key supply of winter food could not have been other than an adverse influence on prairie chickens. Its effects were apparent in a lower count in the 1959 census." They further stated that the loss of woody cover followed by heavy grazing resulted in plant communities unsuitable for prairie chickens.

Another factor having an adverse effect on prairie chicken populations was the 1930s drought, and periodic drought conditions have been a limiting factor since. Numbers of prairie chickens in Hemphill and Wheeler counties were at a high in 1942 (after the drought broke), "but only in respect to the numbers which had been resident during the critically dry 1930s" (Jackson and DeArment, 1963). Population levels remained steady until the recurrence of drought conditions in 1953, when numbers again dropped dramatically. The 1962 census showed a 62 percent decline in Hemphill County and a 55 percent decline in Wheeler County, this despite slight increases in the intervening years when better moisture conditions prevailed.

Another study (Wilson, 1981) disclosed a higher population level of Lesser Prairie-Chickens than had been given earlier by Sands (1968). In 1979, the spring population was estimated at 7,469 birds, and in 1980 at 9,483 birds. On 100,000 acres in Hemphill County, the density in acres/bird for 1979 was 135.86, and for 1980 it was 110.86; on 5,440 acres in Wheeler County the respective densities were 18.37 and 12.71.

The results of recent studies are not encouraging for some populations (J. Hughes, TRWD). The counties where the Lesser Prairie-Chicken is most common are Hemphill north of the Canadian River (100,000 acres of sandage/midgrass rangeland), and Wheeler south of the Canadian River (6,720 acres of shinners oak/midgrass rangeland). Using hectares per lek as a better indicator of breeding density, the Hemphill County population held relatively steady in 1967-85 at an average of 2,747 ha/lek, and the Wheeler County population at 425 ha/lek. In the succeeding period, 1986-99, however, while the Hemphill County

average showed a slight increase to 3,318 ha/lek, the Wheeler County average pointed to a precipitous decline in population at 5,689 ha/lek. The causes of this reduction in the number of leks are unknown. Such a picture is sobering when one reads that in Seward County, Kansas, in the fall of 1904, 15,000-20,000 chickens were seen "in and around this one grain field in a single day" (Bent, 1932), and there may have been as many as two million chickens in Texas prior to 1900 (Litton et al., 1994). Despite today's low numbers, the hunting of these birds continues, although the yearly take is small. As an example, in a two-day hunting season in Wheeler and Hemphill counties during the 1969-70 season, 139 birds were killed (Williams, 1970; W. R. Long).

Many observers of the prairie chicken in earlier years spoke of a southern shift of population during winter. Such a movement is no longer discernible, and the remnant population appears to be stationary. There have been occasional reports of chickens seen in fall and winter at locations outside the eastern counties, indicating a possible longitudinal movement. Two chickens were encountered on the Lake Meredith Recreation Area near Fritch, Carson County, in the fall of 1976. On 4 January 1981, during the Lake Meredith (east) CBC, one was seen at close range near Blue West, Moore County, and four were flushed on 27 December 1981 on the LX ranch near Bonita Creek, northeastern Potter County, during the Lake Meredith (west) CBC. Williams (1967) reported a single bird in winter near Friona, Parmer County, "where none had been seen since 1952," and Oberholser (1974) shows spring and summer sightings for that county, without giving details. A single chicken was seen in Deaf Smith County on 14 August 1993, and a male and three hens in a field west of Garcia Lake in that county during the second week of April 1997. On 4 April 1998, two chickens were again observed in western Deaf Smith County. The Parmer and Deaf Smith birds were possibly wanderers from farther south, where another small population resides on the South Plains along the Texas-New Mexico line from Andrews to Bailey counties (Litton et al., 1994).

NESTING: Other than Bent (1932), who gave egg dates in Colorado and Texas ranging from 5 May to 12 June, data is lacking on both nesting and egg dates for the study area. During the TRBAP, CO nesting was found in one quadrangle (Glazier; nest with 11 eggs, 20 May 1987), PR in five (Mobeetie, Pond Creek NW, Wheeler, Kelton, Shamrock West), and PO in one (Shamrock East). Oberholser (1974) names a breeding record for Potter County ("young bird located at Amarillo on June 13, 1938, Dean Arnadon"). One would like to know the details of this observation.

SPECIMENS: Specimens have been taken in Hemphill (10 February 1929, MVZ; 8 April 1948, 21 December 1971, 11 June 1981, rowc), Moore (MCHM), and Wheeler

(13 May 1929, MVZ; 16 August 1936, 25 September 1936, 18 January 1955, TCW; 23 October 1984, WFWZ; unspecified date, WTAMU) counties. The origins of two mounted birds on display (P-PM) are not known. Oberholser (1974) shows specimens taken in Gray and Wheeler counties without naming where they were deposited.

Wild Turkey *Meleagris gallopavo* Linnaeus

STATUS: Fairly common to common resident locally.

OCCURRENCE: The Wild Turkey has been recorded in all of the Texas Panhandle counties except Castro, Dallam, Deaf Smith, Parmer, Sherman, and Swisher.

The history of the Wild Turkey in the Texas Panhandle is one of abundance, followed by eradication and reintroduction. It is the one species of bird mentioned by all early explorers. Oberholser (1974) relates that "the first definite [published] record of any species of bird within the confines of the present state of Texas was of the Wild Turkey; the naturalist with the Long Expedition in the Rocky Mountains noted a flock on August 5, 1820, at a point on the Canadian River thirty miles west of present-day Tascosa (Oldham Co.)." In his west-to-east traverse of the northern Panhandle in 1845, Abert (1846) mentions the turkey several times, always in terms of its abundance. Along the Canadian River approximately four miles east of Tascosa, he speaks of its "abundance in the neighborhood of our camp." Near Lefors, Gray County, in the valley of the North Fork of the Red River, he noticed tracks of the birds in the sand, "which game appeared to be very abundant," while in present-day Wheeler County, "the innumerable tracks of the wild turkey showed that they must be very abundant." East of present-day Plemons, Hutchinson County, he again found it plentiful "and our people killed great numbers of them." Shorger (1966) relates that during the winter of 1868-69 in Oklahoma, "Sheridan was camped in the vicinity of the Antelope Hills, Ellis County, where the trees were black with turkeys." This would have been only a few miles east of the present Texas-Oklahoma state line.

A decline in the Wild Turkey was noted by McCauley (1877) as early as 1876: "This species was first met with at Wolf Creek, Indian Territory, where numbers were observed, but not in the abundance in which it was found as lately as two years ago. It may be said to be common throughout the whole section visited save in the alkali region of Red River proper. The decrease or disappearance of this game bird from this section, particularly from the Palo Duro and the Washita regions, has been very marked during the last few years."

By the 1930s Russell (1935) says there were no turkeys left in the Palo Duro, the last one having been killed "over twenty-five years ago," and in their studies

neither Cartlander (1934) nor Stevenson (1942) mentions the species. Thompson (1952) quotes from the Texas Game, Fish and Oyster Commission (1945): "It is now believed that none of the original wild turkey stock remains there or elsewhere in the northern one-third of the State as far east as Fort Worth. . . . The present occurrence of Turkeys in the northern one-third . . . is the result of restocking during the last twenty years."

Shorger (1966) names two subspecies of Wild Turkey as having had original ranges including West Texas: *M. g. intermedia*, the Rio Grande Turkey, and *M. g. merriami*, Merriam's Turkey. The *intermedia* subspecies occupied the eastern and central Panhandle north to the Canadian River bottoms; the portion occupied by *merriami* was along the Canadian River "probably as far east as Carson County," where it encountered *intermedia*. He says further that in the restocking program, "Rio Grande turkeys have been liberated in northwestern Texas." Hawkins (1945) has this to say of the Merriam's Turkey: "Introduced and established. Once native to this area, the original stock apparently was exterminated and has since been replaced along the Canadian River and at Palo Duro Canyon. Many of the birds for restocking came from the Cottonwood Ranch in Collingsworth County which reportedly received its original stock from California. Thus, the present turkeys are a badly mixed lot and should not be confused with the birds found here by Coronado."

The Wild Turkey today can be found throughout the eastern third of the study area, locally westward down the Canadian River and its tributaries to Oldham County and the Ria Blanca Creek area of Hartley County, and in the Palo Duro Canyon system. In recent years it has moved into the Terra Blanca draw as far west as BRAWR. It is recorded fairly regularly on three of the area CBGs, for which averages and highs are: *Amarillo*—22 (62); *Lake Meredith (west)*—120 (350); *Quinque*—14 (130).

NESTING: The TRBAR found 60 nesting in 17 survey blocks, PR in 18, and 60 in seven. Of the 42 quadrangles, 57 percent lie between the 100th and 101st meridians, 26 percent between the 101st and 102nd, and 17 percent west of the 102nd meridian. The Wild Turkey was found in only two quadrangles in the northwest sector (Hartley County) and in only one in the southwest sector (Randall County). All confirmations but one were based on sightings of young birds. The exception was a nest with ten eggs at BRAWR, 10 May 1987. On the late date of 29 July 1995, a hen with a chick was found in the PRCSR.

SPECIMENS: Specimens are available from Collingsworth (MCHM), Hansford (23 October 1955, MNH), Hutchinson (LMAWM), and Potter (ACMNH) counties. Oberholser (1974) shows specimens for Carson, Childress, and Potter counties without naming where they were deposited.